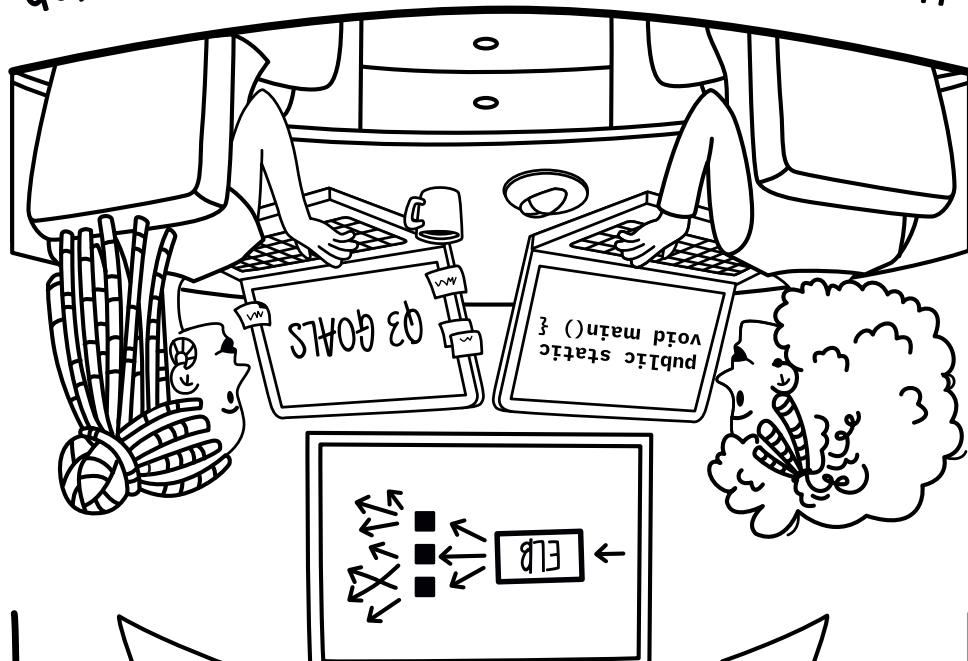


— BY JULIA EVANS —

# HOW TO UNDERSTAND YOUR MANAGER'S JOB & DO AWESOME WORK TOGETHER



# HELP!

<https://jvns.ca/zines>  
like this?  
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# why this zine?

I've been working as a programmer for 6 years and I've had 8 managers. When I started out, I didn't really understand my manager's job or how to work with them.



Since then, I've had some GREAT working relationships with managers and a few less good ones. Having a good relationship with my manager is the most important factor in my happiness at work.



if working with my manager well is so important, maybe I can do things to make that better!

What this zine is about:

- strategies that would have helped my past self work better with her managers
- a little bit of explaining what a manager's job is

What this zine ISN'T about:

- how to deal with a bad manager ↗ very hard !!
- universal advice for everyone. I am just one person who's mostly worked at one company !!

# further reading



thank you so much for reading!  
Here are a couple people  
I've learned from:

The Manager's Path

by Camille Fournier also has a great blog!

A great book about engineering management.  
Super useful for learning what a manager's job is, even if you never want to be a manager :)

Lara Hogan's blog

(<https://larahogan.me/blog>)

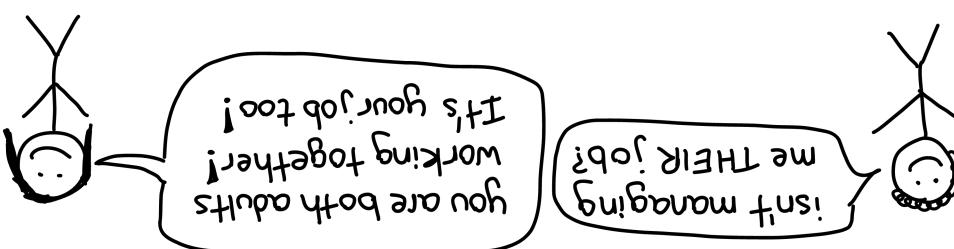
Mostly aimed at managers, but has some amazing posts for non-managers (for instance "what do I do if I'm being underpaid?")

## ★ acknowledgements ★

Cover art by Deise Lino

Thanks to Jay, Kamal, Brett, Maya, Marco, Maggie, Allison, Marc, Will, and many others ♥

19	further reading
18	getting a new manager
17	build your support system
16	figure out what they're great at
15	ask for specific feedback
14	understand their priorities
12-13	remember they're only human
10-11	promotions & performance reviews
9	talk about problems early
8	set clear expectations
7	keep conversations mostly constructive
6	what to talk about in 1:1s
5-5	what's your manager's job?



## Table of contents

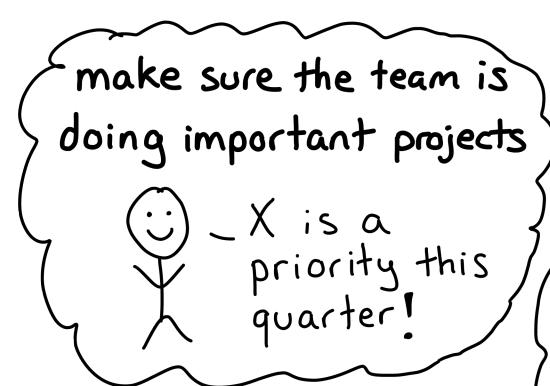
- Being assigned a new manager is a little scary.  
Not all of my managers have been great!  
OH NO what if my new manager is hard to work with??  
Who is this person?  
They seem suspicious  
...  
and ended up, a year later, at  
me and the team so much  
now they have helped  
this is AMAZING
- so I try to assume that's where we'll end up.
- Some things I've found helpful:  
→ write a document explaining my past work to them  
→ ask them about any concerns directly -  
→ often they have great answers!  
→ pay close attention to what they do well  
→ tell them when they do something great

But! More than once I've started out thinking

## new manager getting a

# what's your manager's job?

Understanding a little about your manager's job helps you work well with them! Some things your manager is responsible for:



# build the support system you need

The flip side of "figure out what things they're great at" is that there are always going to be things your manager can't help you with. When that happens, there are a few choices:

- ① Get mad that they can't help
- ② Resign yourself to not getting help with those things
- ③ Find help elsewhere!!!

her blog is GREAT

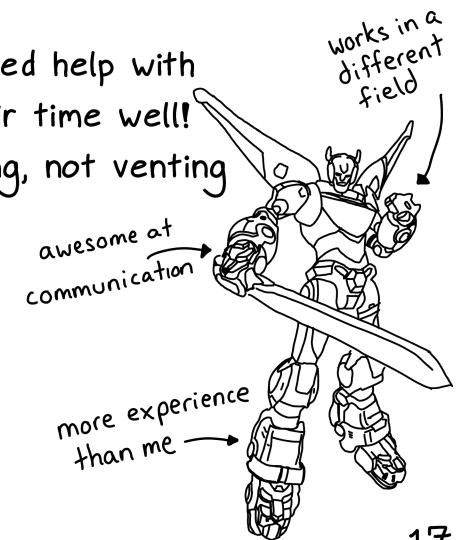
Lara Hogan has an ♥amazing♥ blog post called "When your manager isn't supporting you, build a Voltron"★ about building a crew of people with lots of different skills who you can ask for help!

Some tips she has:

- figure out what you need help with before asking. Use their time well!
- focus on problem solving, not venting

\* A Voltron is a robot built out of several other robots

[bit.ly/managervoltronbingo](http://bit.ly/managervoltronbingo) has a useful bingo card!



manager schedules regularly !!)

To start, let's talk about 1:1s (which hopefully your

get feedback

Understand  
priorities

build trust

Solve  
problems

get awesome  
opportunities

programming!!!

This is awesome because it means that if you just communicate with them well, then you can mostly focus on

is getting work done that will help the business.  
Basically your manager's job is to make sure that your team

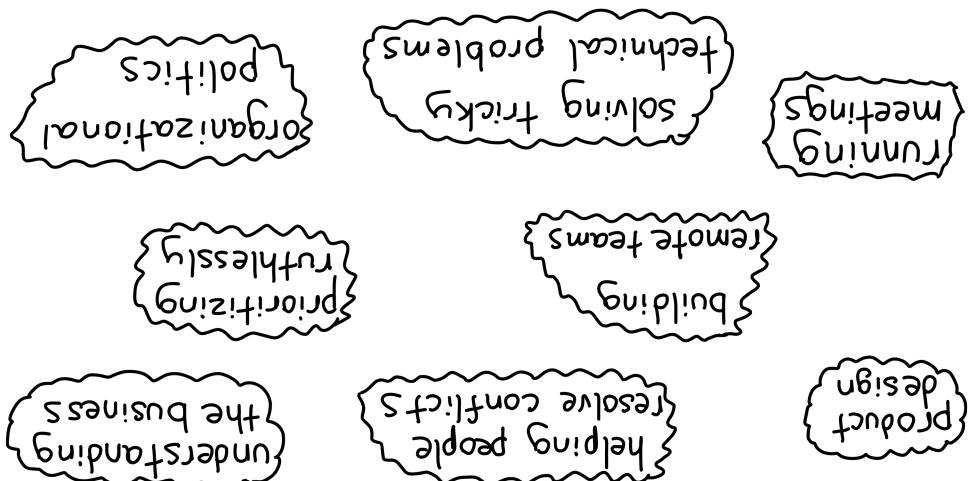
# COMMUNICATION

Most of the rest of this zine is about

With your manager  
How to work well

Also, strengths change over time! If they're not good at something today, maybe check back in a year & see if that's changed.

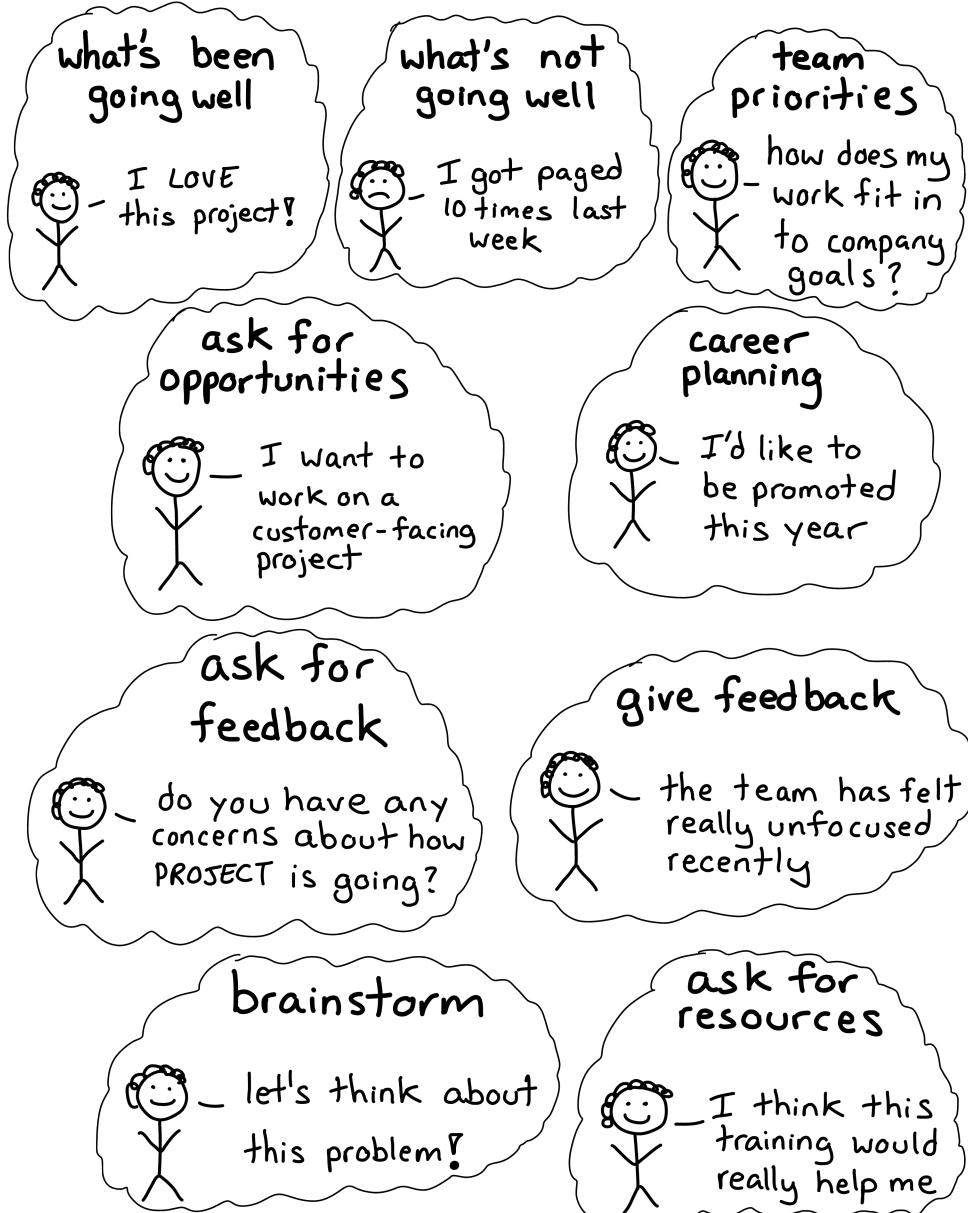
Not every manager is good at every single thing, and that's okay! I like to figure out what my manager is awesome at and lean on them for those things ☺



Different managers are good at different things! I've worked with managers who are amazing at:

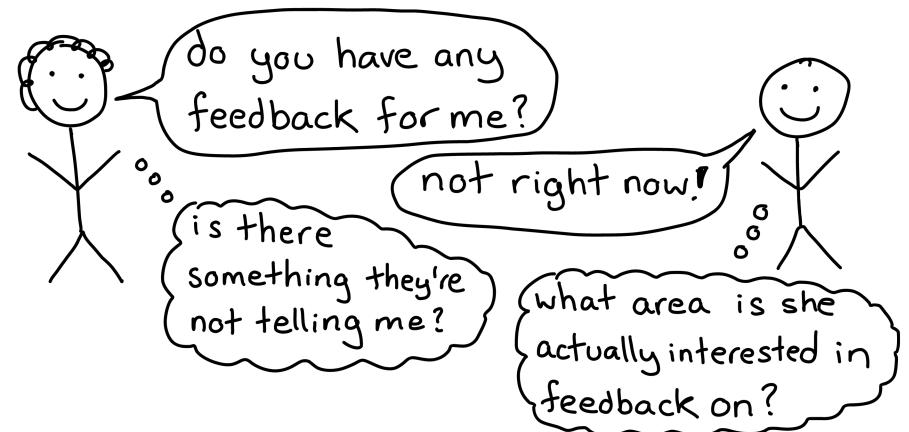
They're great at  
figuring out what

# what to talk about in 1:1s



# ask for specific feedback

I used to ask for feedback like this:

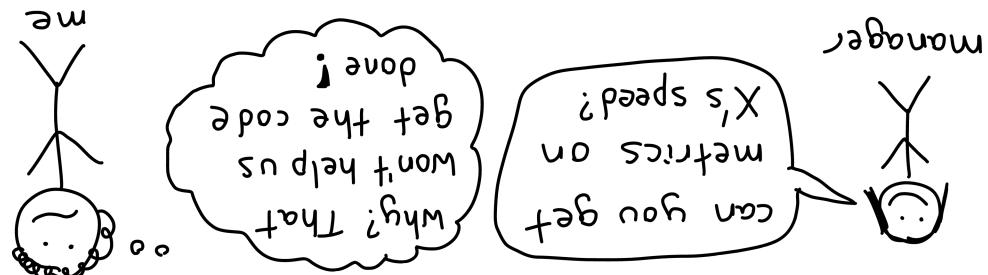


I've learned that I get ★WAY BETTER★ answers if I ask more specific questions!



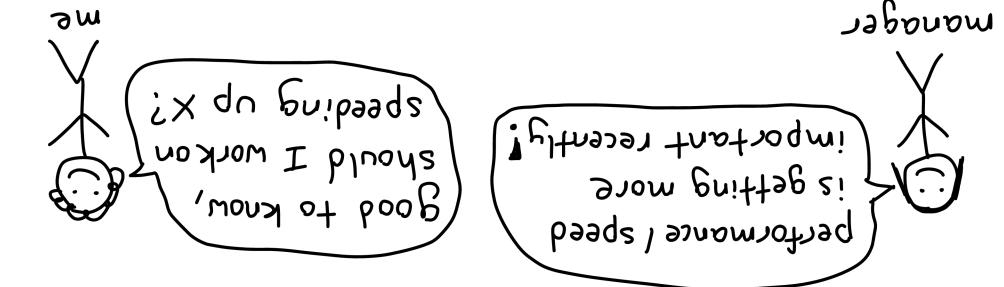
Bonus: asking specific questions forces me to actually think about which areas I might want to focus on

## Understand their goals and priorities



- ① they're hearing complaints about X being slow
- ② without metrics, it's hard for them to have an (that you might not be hearing!)
- ③ informed conversation about those complaints (if defend you if X is actually fast!)

Having regular conversations about their priorities for the team is SO USEFUL and means that I'm surprised less often !!



Venting can be useful too though sometimes! If there's a problem, it's often helpful to bring it up even if I don't have a solution.



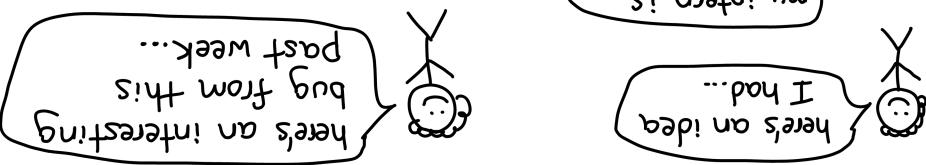
These days, I try to bring up problems that I'm interested in fixing and bring ideas for solutions when I can. Often we just talk about our work:



I've had periods with some managers where, every time we talk, we're talking about SOME problem:

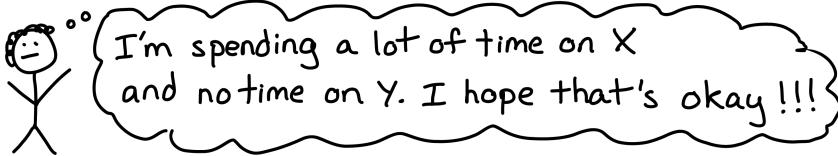
## Keep conversations mostly constructive

Understand their goals and priorities



# set clear expectations

I used to often get stressed out about whether the way I was prioritizing my work was reasonable.



Everything got easier once I could just:

- ① come up for a plan for what to prioritize
- ② tell my manager the plan and ask if it sounds good
- ③ trust them when they say yes !!



Setting expectations is awesome because:

- I feel confident that my plans are reasonable
- my manager is aware of what I'm planning and can coordinate

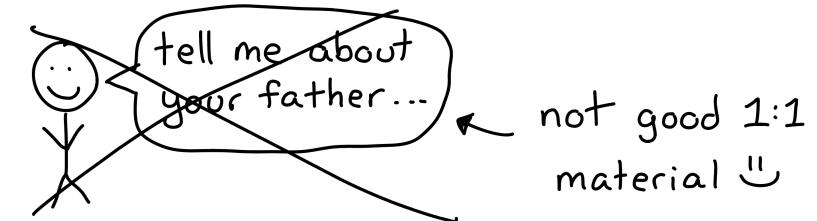
Everybody wins!!!

# On emotional labour

"Emotional labour" is the idea that dealing with feelings-related problems is work.



Emotional labour is part of what managers are paid to do. But!! Managers aren't therapists.

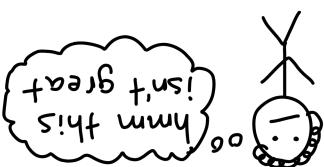


When I'm upset about something, I try to be clear about why and ideally explain what I think a reasonable resolution would be.

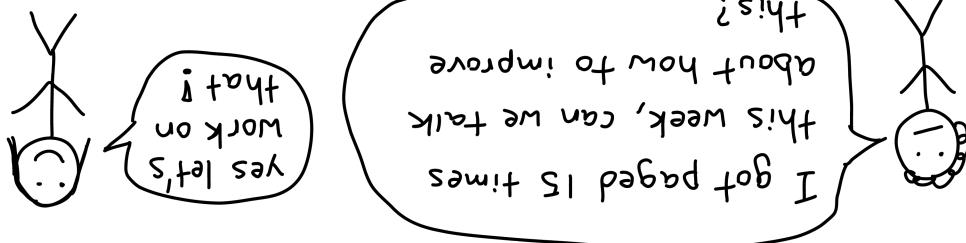


# talk about problems early

Every so often I'll start with a small problem  
and forget to talk about it until I'm REALLY MAD



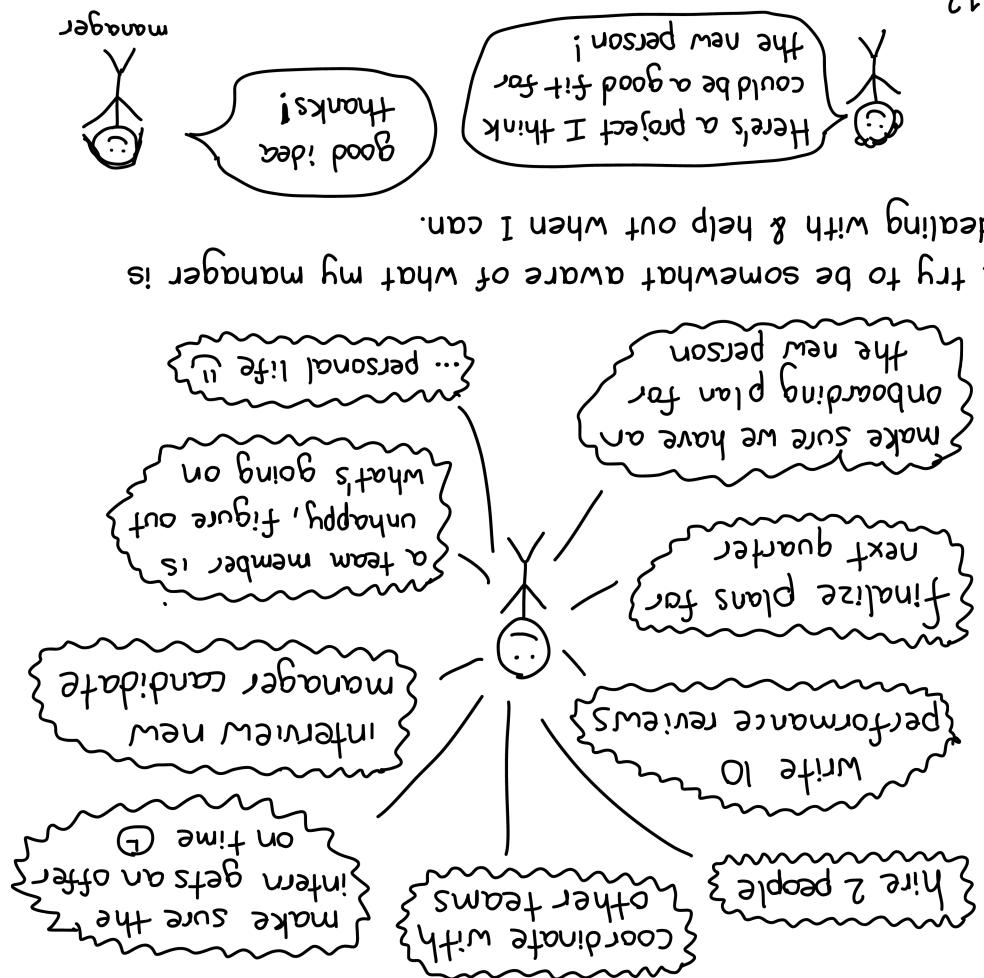
It's way better to bring up a problem early and  
figure it out before it turns into a big deal!



remember they're only human

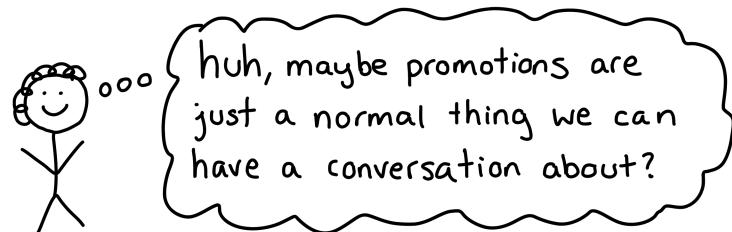
Sometimes I fall into a trap where I think my manager should be able to solve ~~EVE~~RY~~~~ problem on the team and if they're not then they're not doing their job.

It's helpful for me to remember that at any given time they're probably dealing with a lot!



# work with your manager to get promoted

Where I work, my manager \*wants\* people on the team to get promoted. If people are being promoted, it (hopefully) means that they're growing & getting more awesome at their jobs, which makes the team's manager look good!



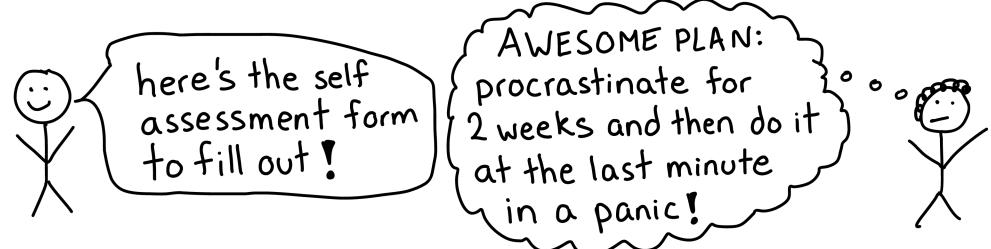
Some ways to start conversations:

- can we walk through the expectations for the next level to make sure that I understand them?
- what areas do you think I should focus on?
- if I accomplished X Y Z, do you think that would be enough to get promoted?

If this is something you care about, keep checking in periodically! The person who cares the most about your career is you ❤️

# on surviving performance reviews

Performance reviews can be really stressful.



Here's what I've been doing for the last year or so, which has helped! About a month before performance review season comes around, I'll compile a **HUGE DOCUMENT** with:

- every project I did in the last year
  - \* the project's goals & results
  - \* cool graphs/metrics that show it was a success
  - \* what my contributions to the project were
- people I've mentored (eg an intern!)
- project plans & documentation I've written

and send it to my manager. My manager's reaction:

